

# THE HEART TRUTH FROM DR. ELIZABETH NABEL

As Director of the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute, which created the award-winning Red Dress as the national symbol for women and heart disease awareness as part of *The Heart Truth* campaign, I've had the privilege of sharing *The Heart Truth* with millions of women. And, I'm thrilled that more and more women are learning about their #1 killer and taking action to reduce their risks for heart disease. Women all across the country are wearing the Red Dress Pin, sharing *The Heart Truth* with loved ones and friends, and taking charge of their health by talking to their doctors, getting regular physical activity, and eating a heart healthy diet. Although we've helped to dramatically increase awareness among women that heart disease is their leading cause of death—from 30 percent of women in 1997 to 57 percent in 2004—more must be done to alert women to the seriousness of heart disease and to the fact that all women are at risk.



Only 13 percent of women consider heart disease to be their own greatest health risk. **Yet an astonishing 80 percent of midlife women (ages 40 to 60) have one or more risk factors for heart disease.** Having one or more risk factors dramatically increases a woman's risk of developing heart disease because risk factors tend to worsen each other's effects.

In 2006, *The Heart Truth* campaign will continue to strengthen women's personal connection to heart disease, while focusing on educating women about the seriousness of having one or more risk factors for heart disease. The following pages contain new data about women, heart disease, and the dangers of multiple risk factors. I encourage you to share this information with women you know and love. Together, we can ensure that all women know *The Heart Truth*.

**Elizabeth G. Nabel, MD**

Director



U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH  
AND HUMAN SERVICES  
National Institutes of Health  
National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute

[www.hearttruth.gov](http://www.hearttruth.gov)



Women &  
Heart Disease

# HEART DISEASE RISK FACTORS

Risk factors are habits or conditions that increase the chance of developing a disease. Some risk factors, such as age (55 or older for women) and family history of early heart disease, can't be changed. The modifiable risk factors for heart disease—which women can do something about—are:

- high blood pressure (hypertension)
- high blood cholesterol
- diabetes
- smoking
- being overweight or obese
- being physically inactive

For midlife women, the most common risk factors for heart disease in order of greatest prevalence include:

- overweight/obesity
- high blood cholesterol
- high blood pressure

Women should talk to a health care professional about their risks and what they can do to lower them, especially if they have multiple risk factors for heart disease.

## The “Multiplier Effect”

Many women don't realize that their risk for heart disease significantly increases based on the number of risk factors they

have. In fact, having just one risk factor can increase a woman's chance of developing heart disease twofold. Having two risk factors increases the chance fourfold, and having three or more risk factors increases a woman's chance of developing heart disease more than tenfold.

## Multiple Risk Factors At-A-Glance

- 32 percent of midlife women have one modifiable risk factor for heart disease
- 30 percent of midlife women have two risk factors for heart disease
- 17 percent of midlife women have three or more risk factors for heart disease

African American and Hispanic women, in particular, have higher rates of some risk factors for heart disease and are disproportionately affected by the disease. More than 80 percent of midlife African American women between the ages of 40-60 are overweight or obese, 52 percent have high blood pressure, and 14 percent have been diagnosed with diabetes. Some 83 percent of midlife Hispanic women are overweight or obese and more than 10 percent have been diagnosed with diabetes.

## Managing Risk Factors

Although heart disease is not curable, the good news is that it is never too late to take action to prevent it. Often, modifying risk factors is all that's needed to significantly reduce one's risk. In fact, by leading a healthy lifestyle, which includes eating a heart healthy diet, quitting smoking, maintaining a healthy weight, and getting physical activity, Americans can lower their risk for heart disease by as much as 82 percent.

## TIPS FOR *heart* HEALTH

- **Don't smoke, and if you do, quit.** Women who smoke are two to six times more likely to suffer a heart attack than non-smoking women. Smoking also boosts the risk of stroke and cancer.
- **Aim for a healthy weight.** It's important for a long, vigorous life. Overweight and obesity cause many preventable deaths.
- **Get moving.** Make a commitment to be more physically active. Aim for 30 minutes of moderate-intensity activity on most, preferably all, days of the week.
- **Eat for heart health.** Choose a diet low in saturated fat and cholesterol, and moderate in total fat that includes whole grains, fruits, and vegetables.
- **Know your numbers.** Ask your doctor to check your blood pressure, cholesterol (total, HDL, LDL, triglycerides), and blood glucose. Work with your doctor to improve any numbers that are not normal.

## States with the Highest Prevalence of Modifiable Risk Factors

Heart disease risk factors, such as high blood pressure, high blood cholesterol, smoking, and physical inactivity, are prevalent among women across the United States. According to recent data from the Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance Survey (BRFSS), the following states and the District of Columbia rank highest in the number of midlife women, defined as ages 45-64, with each of these risk factors.

### High Blood Pressure

Blood pressure is the amount of force exerted by the blood against the walls of the arteries. High blood pressure, also known as hypertension, is often called the “silent killer” because it usually doesn’t cause symptoms but can result in heart disease, heart attack, and stroke.

For women 55 and older, the lifetime risk of developing high blood pressure is about 90 percent. However, women can take action to control or prevent high blood pressure, and thereby avoid many life-threatening disorders.

The States/District of Columbia with the highest percentage of midlife women who have been diagnosed with high blood pressure include:

Illinois	47.9%
Mississippi	44.7%
Alabama	43.7%
District of Columbia	41.1%
Louisiana/Tennessee	40.9%

### High Blood Cholesterol

High blood cholesterol affects about 54 million women. Young women tend to have lower cholesterol levels than young men. But between the ages of 45-55, a woman’s level begins to rise higher than a man’s. After age 55, this “cholesterol gap” continues to widen.

The States with the highest percentage of midlife women who have been diagnosed with high blood cholesterol include:

West Virginia	46.6%
Nevada	44.3%
Kentucky	40.9%
Indiana	40.7%
Texas	40.6%

### Smoking

Cigarette smoking has been described as the most important individual health risk in this country. The more than 22 million women who smoke in the United States are two to six times more likely to suffer a heart attack than non-smoking women—and this risk increases with the number of cigarettes smoked each day.

The States with the highest percentage of current midlife women smokers include:

Kentucky	30.3%
Oklahoma	26.2%
West Virginia	25.4%
Arkansas	24.8%
Nevada	24.8%

### Physical Inactivity

More than 40 percent of women do not engage in leisure-time physical activity, and more than 60 percent fail to get at least 30 minutes a day of moderately intense physical activity. Physical inactivity boosts a woman’s chances of developing heart-related problems even if she has no other risk factors. It also increases the likelihood that women will develop other heart disease risk factors, such as high blood pressure, diabetes, and overweight. Fortunately, research shows that as little as 30 minutes of moderate activity such as brisk walking, gardening, and house-cleaning, on most days of the week, helps to protect heart health.

The States with the highest percentage of midlife women who do not participate in any leisure-time activity include:

Louisiana	37.5%
Mississippi	37.5%
Oklahoma	37.2%
Tennessee	37.2%
Alabama	35.2%

Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance Survey (BRFSS) 2001-2003. <http://209.217.72.34/healthywomen/ReportFolders/reportFolders.aspx>

## Questions to Ask Your Doctor

Getting answers to these questions will give women vital information about their heart health and what they can do to improve it.

1. What is my risk for heart disease?
2. What is my blood pressure? What does it mean for me, and what do I need to do about it?
3. What are my cholesterol numbers? (These include total cholesterol, LDL or "bad" cholesterol, HDL or "good" cholesterol, and triglycerides.) What do they mean for me, and what do I need to do about them?
4. What are my "body mass index" and waist measurement? Do they indicate that I need to lose weight for my health?
5. What is my blood sugar level, and does it mean I'm at risk for diabetes?
6. What other screening tests for heart disease do I need? How often should I return for checkups for my heart health?
7. What can you do to help me quit smoking?
8. How much physical activity do I need to help protect my heart?
9. What is a heart healthy eating plan for me? Should I see a registered dietitian or qualified nutritionist to learn more about healthy eating?
10. How can I tell if I'm having a heart attack?

## Women's Heart Disease Statistics

Women often do not take their risk of heart disease seriously or personally. They fail to make the connection between the risk factors and their own chance of developing heart disease.

### The Heart Truth is:

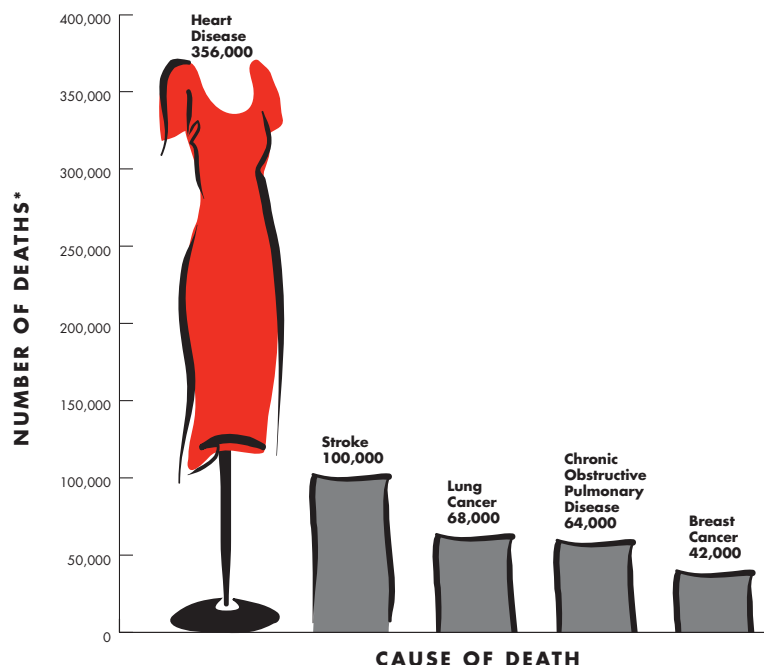
- Heart disease is the #1 killer of American women.
- One in every three women dies of heart disease. One in 30 dies of breast cancer.
- Women's heart disease risk starts to rise in middle age.
- About 3 million American women have had a heart attack.

- Two-thirds of American women who have had a heart attack don't make a full recovery.
- Nearly two-thirds of American women who die suddenly of a heart attack had no prior symptoms.
- Only 57 percent of women are aware that heart disease is the leading cause of death among women.
- Only 20 percent of women identified heart disease as the greatest health problem facing women today.

*The Heart Truth* is a national campaign for women about heart disease sponsored by the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute, part of the National Institutes of Health, U.S. Department of Health and Human services. **To learn more, visit [www.hearttruth.gov](http://www.hearttruth.gov).**

## LEADING CAUSES OF DEATH FOR AMERICAN WOMEN (2002)

One in three women dies from heart disease. It's the #1 killer of women, regardless of race or ethnicity. It also strikes at younger ages than most people think, and the risk rises in middle age. And, two-thirds of women who have heart attacks never fully recover.



Source: The Healthy Heart Handbook for Women, National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute (2005).  
\*Numbers of deaths are rounded to the nearest thousand.